

## DEPOPULATION OF RURAL AREAS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper indicates the depopulation of the rural areas in Serbia during the period from 1961 to 2011. Based on the research on a number of indicators, there have been significant changes in the rural society and the rural areas in Serbia, primarily expressed through the processes of: depopulation, ageing and migrations that have affected socioeconomic and rural development. The theoretical framework for the sociological study of the villages was based on the monographic method for the qualitative and quantitative description of the village settlements and regions. The analytical method was used for the interpretation of cause and functional relations within the rural area. The analysis of documents, the official statistical data and publications (Population and households of Serbia according to the 2002 census, Population of Serbia at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Villages in Serbia; the changes in structure and the problem of sustainable development. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in 2011 (Census of Agriculture 2012 related to the process of depopulation of the rural areas in Serbia were used for the research. The changes occurred in the rural areas of Serbia have resulted in the depopulation of many villages which are without inhabitants now. Today's population structure in villages shows the trend of reducing the share of the young population and the increase in elderly population, all of which affect the demographic picture of the rural areas in Serbia. Such situation leads to the change in the structure of the working age population, with the further tendency of the village depopulation, especially in the mountainous areas where the fertile contingent has almost disappeared.

**Key words:** deagrarization, demographics, depopulation, migrations, rural areas.

### INTRODUCTION

The last few decades of the 20th and 21st centuries have brought new trends in demography. Although the number of inhabitants on Earth increases, in 2011 it reached 7 billion (current estimates 7.6 billion), some areas are struggling with the occurrence of depopulation. In addition to the number of population, the structure of this population begins to worry. Although the developed world was expecting an increase in the share of the old population, it seems that this social phenomenon surprised many. The contingent of the population, primarily women in the fertile period, is decreasing, the birth rate is also lower than the mortality rate. All this leads to a decades-long negative natural increase which is a direct cause of depopulation. What concerns the experts and the public is, for now, the continuity of this trend and the tendency of growth. Of demographic changes that are most noticeable, in addition to general population aging, there is a structural change in activity, more precisely, there has been a drastic reduction in the share of the agricultural population, primarily an increase in the number of residents who work in the industry, and then a change in the orientation of the working population towards the service activities. The structural changes in the population, with which we were confronted, did not bypass our country.

Emphasized demographic problems in all parts of the Republic of Serbia, both in urban and especially in rural areas, are not exempted from these trends. Depopulation, disappearance of

villages, aging, migration to abroad are significant problems that slow down socioeconomic development.

Looking at the population censuses from 1961 to 2011, we tried to analyze which are the main factors that lead to depopulation, the interconnectedness of these factors, how these changes reflect on the demographic structure of our country's rural areas and their impact on rural development.

#### *Goal and importance of work*

The aim of this paper is to look at and define the demographic problems of the rural areas of our country, to present and learn which factors and processes led to these problems, their interaction with the population and the consequences that remain after their operation.

#### *The subject of research*

The subject of research is rural society, the population relations that govern in this society, the impact of the deagrarianization process, or industrialization on the rate of depopulation of rural areas. All processes are explained on the basis of official indicators and analyzes of professional literature, as well as official data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. It should be emphasized, since the period from 1961 to 2011 was that the censuses conducted in 2002 and 2011 did not include AP Kosovo and Metohija. Namely, in 2002, there were no conditions for the census to be maintained, and in 2011, the Albanian population boycotted the census.

#### *Methods of research*

Within the research method we used: analytical method, statistical method, monographic method and method of content analysis.

### **RURAL SOCIETY AND RURAL AREAS - BASIC CHARACTERISTICS**

The rural society of each country has its own sociological *differentia specifica*, which distinguishes it from other societies, especially urban, i.e. societies by cities. Because of these differences and peculiarities, they also have a special position in global societies of state communities, as they have their own specific structures, relationships, collectives and patterns of behavior. The first environment that man created by his work was the rural environment, and the relations that govern him can be (Kostić, 1975).:

- Persistent - because they are maintained all the time of man's life,
- Reciprocal - because man and the environment interact with each other,
- Specific - because for each community and personality is different,
- Variable - because they change in time and space.

The rural social structure is a set of determinants of the rural way of life, such as (Mitrović, 2015):

- village and population - demographic substructure;
- rural economy and agrarian relations - agrarian substructure;
- local social organization - social substructure that includes village groups and institutions;
- conforming patterns of rural (folk) culture that regulate, direct and devise the peasant life and interaction between individuals and groups in the village.

The characteristics that connect rural areas are: low population density, population aging, disproportionate demographic structure, departure of educated young people, etc. The great impact on rural areas of Serbia is the dominant agricultural sector, the decline in employment in agriculture and agricultural activities, the pressure of nearby urban areas on land, as well as major differences in the living conditions of the population, an increasing number of vulnerable

people, more alienation due to lack of money, the loss of employment opportunities outside agriculture and the reduction of service activities in those areas (Đorđević & Todorović, 2006).

Historically, rural areas not only of our country but of entire Europe have always been neglected and without many developmental perspectives. Accelerated rural development has taken place in Europe in the past 25 years, first of all, the European Economic Community, and then the EU when policies for the development of rural areas have been launched.

Our country, which belongs to the group of countries in transition, has been affected by the process of transformation of agriculture and institutions, which has affected and affects rural areas and the life of the rural population.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of rural areas of the European Union and Serbia

Basic characteristics	EU countries	Serbia
Socio-economic structure	18% of the total population live in predominantly rural areas	55% of the population lives in rural areas
	8% of the economically active population is employed in agriculture	about 33% of employees work in the primary sector
	20% of the active rural population works in agriculture	45% of the active rural population works in agriculture
State of agriculture	high productivity	low productivity
	well-equipped farms with a size of 20 ha	households of average size, equipped with poor mechanization
	support for agriculture in the 60's	Budget support to agriculture is insufficient
Rural infrastructure	well developed	poor - physically, economically and socially
Economic infrastructure	diversified	insufficiently diversified
	new rural businesses and services	insufficiently developed rural businesses, low level of social services

Source: Small rural households in Serbia and rural non-agricultural economy (Bogdanov, 2007)

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

According to the data of Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, observing population censuses in the period from 1961 to 2011, the total population of Serbia in the period from 1961-1981 grew, and this was conditioned by intense social development after the Second World War (Table 2 and Chart 1).

Table 2. Number of inhabitants of Serbia in the period 1961-2011

Census year	Population
1961	7.641.962
1971	8.446.726
1981	9.313.686
1991	7.822.795
2002	7.498.001
2011	7.186.862

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

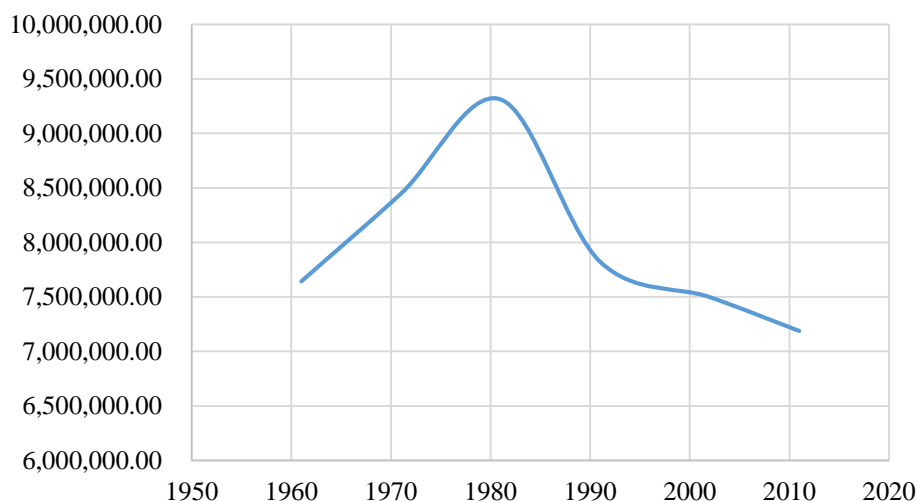


Figure 1. Population of Serbia in the period 1961-2011

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Already in the 1991 census, the number of inhabitants was noticed, although the movement and the change in the number were influenced by the events caused by the beginning of the dissolution of the former SFRY. As a result of these events, a large number of refugees affected the mitigation of certain demographic processes, primarily depopulation. Further census results in 2002 and 2011 also confirm the downward trend in the number of inhabitants.

Finding and explaining the causes of depopulation is a very complex task for which socio-sociological changes need to be observed from a much wider and more comprehensive aspect.

#### *The process of demographic transformation*

The demographic development of Serbia at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century took place in exceptional socio-economic and historical conditions. The movement of the total population was significantly higher than in the previous period. Due to the decline in fertility and under the influence of significant demographic aging, there is a decrease in the total population of our country.

The Serbian village in the transition process experienced a real "demographic breakdown". Population in rural areas has experienced a deep demographic aging (Živković & Jelić, 2008).

Rural population, these are not just people in the village, the mass occupied by rural areas, food producers, potential users of industrial products, and also a cheap labor pool, and this anthropological and social fact should not be ignored in demographic, sociological, economic or any other consideration (Mitrović, 2015).

Social changes first begin in the villages, where there is a special type of depopulation called rural depopulation, that is, dying out of the village (Tomašević & Sokolovska, 2015). The process of demographic transformation, i.e. demographic transition is manifested by a whole series of changes in the structure, spatial distribution and characteristics of the population, the most important of which is the deagrarization process, ie. the abandonment of agriculture as the main occupation, and for the settlements the process of urbanization. These social processes are multidimensional and very complex, and in itself contradictory. Deagrarization in villages usually follows industrialization as a modernizing social process in cities. Urbanization is demographically reflected in the rapid and mass migration of people from villages to cities, which is statistically expressed as an increase in the share of urban population in the total population (Mitrović, 2015). However, sociologically and culturally-viewed urbanization is not just the relocation of people from the village to cities. This is

certainly the process of spreading the urban style and lifestyle that carries with it a certain kind of communication, patterns of behavior, nutrition, housing, dressing, etc.

The prosperity of non-agricultural activities, or the changed needs and structure of the labor force, are certainly the result of technical and technological progress. The processes of industrialization and urbanization contributed to the decline of the agricultural population, which is one of the laws of the social division of labor and economic development. In the initial phases of the deagrarization process, firstly, unskilled labor from agriculture is employed in non-agricultural activities, and later it also provides access to qualifications through education, gaining expertise and knowledge as conditions for transition to non-agricultural activities. Namely, after World War II, the economy of our country was characterized by a great shortage of labor, and the needs for it in certain branches such as mining, forestry or construction were large. As a large number of potential workforce was in rural areas, the state embarked on a process of accelerated industrialization that was often accompanied by the forced labor of rural people working in factories and mines. This system initially resulted in an unqualified or low-skilled workforce that not only ruled out extremely poor quality products, but also the production capacities were only partially used. The process of deagrarization as a transitional development process was late in relation to more developed European countries and took place slowly, until it accelerated rapidly in the first decades after the socialist upheaval.

Deagrarization was most prevalent in the Belgrade region, with only 0.82% of the agricultural population in comparison to the total population, and this is the most prominent urbanization in Serbia. Although Vojvodina is considered a traditionally agrarian region, the process of rapid deagrarization did not bypass it, the share of agricultural in relation to the total population fell from 9.11% (2002) to 5.83% (2011) (Mitrović, 2015).

Therefore, in terms of development, other sectors of the economy are neglected, especially agriculture, where the growth rate was several times lower than the industrial one. In agriculture there were no new investments, prices were formed for agricultural products, farmers' incomes were low, the agricultural product market was unstable, and very often there were damages from natural disasters (Penev, 2006). All this represented one of the strongest push factors affecting the village-city migration.

Today's demographic structure is the result of modern migration from the village through education and employment in non-agricultural activities. In contemporary migration the consequences are diverse: economic, cultural, and political, and all together they are expressed in the changed demographic structure and the new (contemporary) type of reproduction of the population.

One of the biggest social problems in Serbia is the rapid decrease in the rural population, ie the depopulation of villages that exceeds the pace of decreasing the agricultural population and the overall population as a whole. These are villages with the elderly, they have a lower birthrate, a higher mortality rate, and therefore a natural increase is negative, and depopulation is even more pronounced than emigration. Since in these villages the population is mostly agricultural, this depopulation of the village manifests itself as a senilization of the village and as a devastation of agriculture and all rural areas away from major communications, from larger cities and municipal centers, without industrial facilities, communal and social infrastructure and without a development perspective (Mitrović, 2015).

## **DEPOPULATION PROCESS WITH A REVIEW OF CRITICAL REGIONS**

Since the 1990s, our country has been intensively involved in the process of depopulation. Natural increase in all parts of the Republic of Serbia is below the threshold of generational (biological) renewal of the population, except for Kosovo and Metohija. The causes of this phenomenon are numerous: biological, socio-political, economic, cultural and other (Mišović, 2009). The wave of depopulation first affected not only rural areas, but, we can freely say,

those on the margins of our country, in the border regions, in areas where there is no developed industry, where the natural characteristics of the field allow the activity to be performed only in the primary sector of the economy, areas where several ethnological groups are mixed, in places with disadvantaged infrastructure and communications. The socio-demographic structure of rural population in rural areas has significantly changed. There are fewer young farmers. The village is confronted with depopulation, socio-economic insecurity and social problems (Jelić & Jovanović, 2018).

Distinguishing depopulation centers in Serbia are Niš, Pčinj, Pirot and Bor districts, where even villages with less than 10 inhabitants are recorded, some of which are not even electrified (Spalević, 2009).

Table 3. Number of inhabitants of highly depopulated districts in the period 1961-2011

District	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011
Niš	327.367	363.292	394.110	396.043	391.932	376.319
Pčinj	222.520	230.373	238.753	243.529	255.500	159.081
Pirot	145.789	136.008	127.427	116.926	106.815	92.479
Bor	160.096	175.848	180.463	178.718	170.619	124.992

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

According to Table 3, better overview is given in a graphic display (Figure 2).

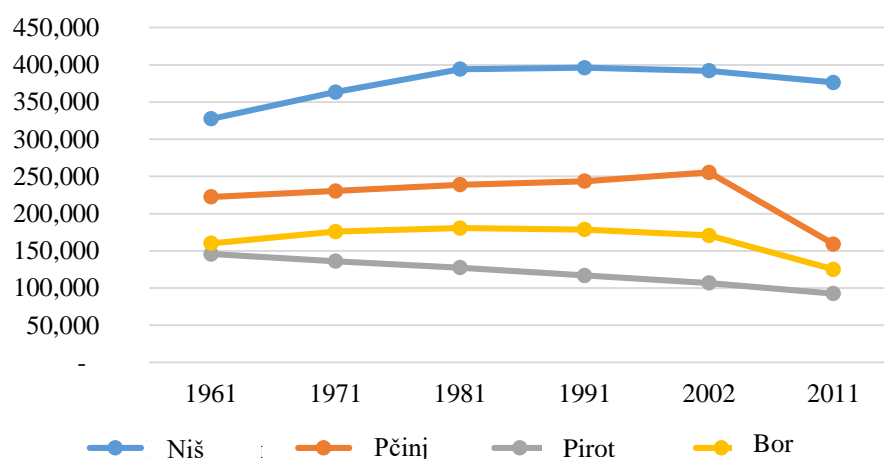


Figure 2. Number of inhabitants of highly depopulated districts in the period 1961-2011

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Although according to the data in Table 3 depopulation is obvious and pronounced, a better picture will be given to us if we observe the decrease in the number of inhabitants outside the city centers of the given districts.

Table 4. Number of inhabitants of rural settlements in the period 1961-2011

District	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011
Niš	233.163	218.366	209.676	190.414	175.693	163.244
Pčinj	188.426	177.860	159.612	146.682	<b>132.246</b>	<b>67.532</b>
Pirot	118.437	93.782	73.671	56.766	44.807	34.672
Bor	121.746	115.979	107.052	<b>94.414</b>	<b>65.985</b>	54.112

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

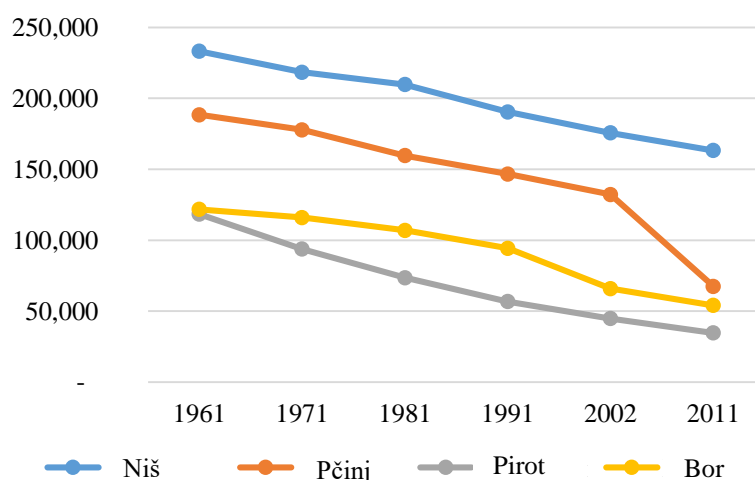


Figure 3. Number of inhabitants of rural settlements in the period 1961-2011

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Given the example of the Bor District, we can best explain the demographic picture of depopulation regions. Namely, in 1961, the previous Bor mine was restructured into the Mining and Smelting Basin (MSB) Bor, and as such it operated until 1981. According to the data from Table 3, we see that in the 2 inter-census period the population increased, the population gravitated toward the regional center of Bor, and this successful business of MSB managed to maintain not so much a decrease in the number of inhabitants of the rural areas of this district. The population of rural areas produced food and other agricultural products for the needs of the city market of Bor, which prevented significant migrations, in addition to the daily ones, because the population mostly went to work in the MSB. Depopulation processes can be explained in the same way or in the same way for other districts.

The next census, in 1991, showed a slightly higher rate of depopulation, but a record value is made in 2002, showing the entire picture of our economy and its situation in the 1990s. The general economic crisis, wars and sanctions, the accumulated debts of this company that managed to avoid bankruptcy with the help of the state only, contributed to the sharp decline in the number of rural population that no longer had a stable neighborhood market and the possibility of market placement of products.

The negative natural increase of Serbian population, especially this region, which has been present for decades, in the interim period 2002-2011. It was also very prominent about the high rate of emigration. From other regions of Serbia, the increase in the number of inhabitants was recorded only in the Belgrade region, thanks to the positive migration balance. Other regions represent emigration areas. The region of South and East Serbia, had a loss of about 190,000 inhabitants, and this was more contributed by the emigration than negative natural growth. This is why this region is unique in Serbia (RZS, 2015).

Observing Kosovo and Vojvodina as two areas in Serbia that mark two mutually opposed and different types of demographic reproduction, the following is noted:

- Vojvodina is an area with a low mortality rate, but even lower birth rates; the population in this region is increasingly old, and that there is no immigration from the side, the mere reproduction of the population would be compromised,
- Kosovo and Metohija region with extremely high birth rate, which is characterized by the Albanian population.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Data unavailable due to the boycott of the 2002 and 2011 census.

Unfortunately, in our country, in some municipalities, the lowest natural increase in the population was recorded, with large negative rates of 15.5 %. These are the municipalities of Babušnica, Blace, Crna Trava, Dimitrovgrad and Gadžin Han, while the municipalities of Ražanj, Svrlijig and Knjaževac recorded negative rates between 10 and 15.5 %. Population policy, and especially the policy of a more balanced social and economic development of mountain areas, should be such as to mitigate the mentioned demographic processes, but it seems that it has come to an endless cycle where schools go out because there are no children, and when a child is born it does not have anywhere to go to school, so the whole family emigrates. We come to the conclusion that an entire settlement is extinguished, so that by analyzing the census from 1948 to 2011, if the settlements are observed according to the number of inhabitants, there is a clear increase in the number of settlements with less than 100 inhabitants. These are the settlements from which the masses of young people, reproductively capable, have moved away, and the rest are older and those who could not go anywhere. The natural pyramid of the population is aggravated by age and by gender, and the critical mass of the population that needs to ensure the normal reproduction of a population is reduced.

Table 5. Settlements with less than 100 inhabitants, according to the censuses 1948-2011

	Republic of Serbia	Belgrade region	Šumadija and Western Serbia region	Vojvodina region	South and East Serbia region
1948	84	2	50	8	24
1953	74	0	46	4	24
1961	72	0	41	3	28
1971	134	0	58	3	73
1981	281	0	95	5	181
1991	483	1	154	5	323
2002	717	1	239	8	469
2011	1034	1	328	12	693

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

The once-present problem of mountain-hilly areas, agrarian overcrowding and the absence of large industrial and urban centers that would be the drivers of development, were the instigators at the time of the accelerated industrialization campaign, and today the old and large industrial plants have been completely demolished. Too big cities (like Belgrade) are stifling themselves and the whole environment that once gravitated towards them today is almost grown up and together with the center of power and content (the city) makes one big conglomerate. On the other hand, the devastation of rural areas, the abandonment of natural resources, lead the rural environment into a sink where the population and their cultural standards are further away from societies in which demographic transition and social modernization have advanced.

In Table 5, the number of settlements with less than one hundred inhabitants in our country has drastically increased in the indicated period. These settlements are spatially located in the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia and the Region of South and East Serbia.

## CONCLUSION

By studying the depopulation of rural areas, we come to the conclusion that the trends of modern society, the processes of industrialization and urbanization have not brought well to the rural areas of our country. The main indicators of depopulation, primarily low birth rates, high mortality and negative natural increase, low fertility rates and intensive aging, have a significant effect in the municipalities of Crna Trava, Gadžin Han, Babušnica and Ražanj. The intensive industrialization process had a negative impact on the number of agricultural



population and the rate of activity of the same. Due to the long-term process of emigration of the younger and more reproductive population, some of our rural areas have become, demographically speaking, senile. What concerns the professional and scientific public is that for now, this process is one-way and has a tendency to increase. Significant demographic changes in the structure of the rural population of our country occurred during this period.

In our society there is a demographic worsening of the rural population. Particularly the changes have been made by the agricultural population, with fewer farmers.

A long-term plan composed of a number of experts is needed to alleviate this problem, since rural areas have always been neglected and without many developmental prospects, although social change first begins in the villages. The process of spreading the urban way and lifestyle brought with it a certain form of communication and behavior patterns that are not able to be fully realized in rural areas, but they are also hard to be accept from the social side.

Observing the global trend in the world, the improvement of rural living conditions (the development of small-scale commercial agriculture and the development of private production that would help the younger population and enable them to stay in the countryside) could lead to a reduction in the emigration rate. Although the Rural Development Sector has been established with the aim of increasing the efficiency and improvement of the social aspects of life in these areas, the practice shows that for the time being it can not stop this, partially natural process.

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